

What Women Bring to the Fight

Ellen L. Haring

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ABSTRACT: The recent decision to integrate the US military fully was met with a range of emotions. For some it was a misguided decision that would erode combat effectiveness and have negative consequences for US security. Various objections were raised to justify keeping women out of combat units but most have been demolished by ten years of combat. This article exposes the flaws in two of the more persistent objections: (1) the presence of women in combat units will erode the vital bond that develops between men and (2) women are not as strong as men and so put male soldiers at risk.

The recent decision to integrate women fully into the military was met with a range of controversy and emotions on several fronts. For women and many men in the military it was a quietly celebrated milestone. For women outside the military it was lauded as a step toward true equality. For others, it was viewed as a misguided decision that would ultimately erode the combat effectiveness of the military and have negative consequences for US national security. Before the current conflict, a veritable potpourri of objections was raised to justify keeping women out of combat units; almost all those objections have fallen away in the last ten years. The American public has not objected to women being killed or wounded in combat any more than it has to men. Personal hygiene and privacy has not been problematic. Women can keep pace on long-range patrols, and the performance of men overall does not degrade when fighting alongside women. Data from the 2011 class at West Point reveals over 52 percent of female cadets, albeit a select group, passed the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) using the male standards.¹ In short, a percentage of women are just as physically capable as men.

Moreover, as new research suggests, women can enhance the combat capabilities of the military from the squad to the joint staff without impairing cohesion. Cohesion is not just linked to common traits such as race, ethnicity, or gender but is based on collective goals and objectives. Recent research also shows small-unit cohesion is not impaired by the addition of women, as once thought. The comments below are intended to reveal what new research says about the benefits of including women at all levels and all branches of the military.

Collective Intelligence

Carnegie Mellon and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) have partnered to examine group or collective intelligence to understand how to optimize team performance. The research shows groups are collectively more intelligent than individuals on a range of simple to complex tasks. Additionally, the research found that a group's

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1 Jeffrey Dietz, "Breaking the Ground Barrier: Equal Protection Analysis of the U.S. Military's Direct Ground Combat Exclusion of Women," *Military Law Review* Vol. 207 (2011): 137-138.

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collective intelligence tends to increase as the percentage of women in the group increases. Researchers believe this may be due to a trait they call “social sensitivity” which reflects how well a person can read the emotions of other people. The ability to perceive and sense emotional changes leads to more collaborative patterns of group behavior and women tend to score higher than men in this category.² The chart below shows the relational impact the percentage of women in a group had on the collective intelligence of 192 teams tested on a range of simple to complex tasks.

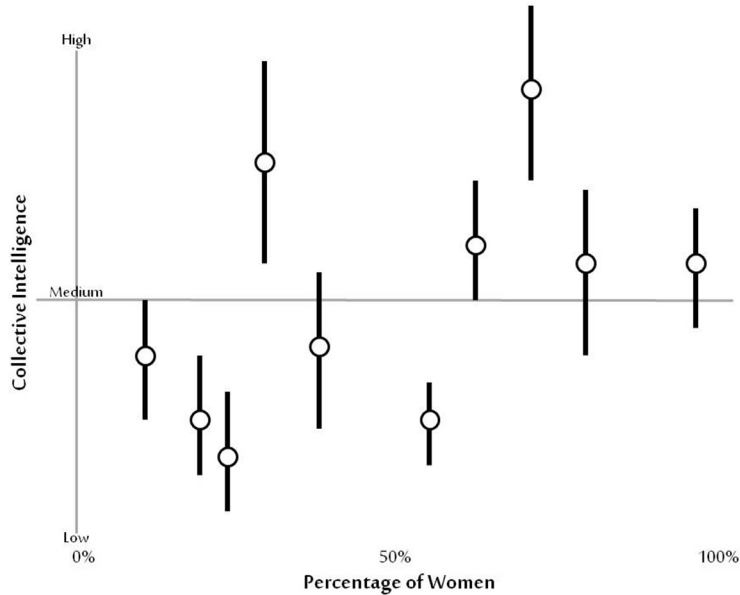


Figure 1. The Female Factor—The chart plots the collective intelligence of the 192 teams in the study against the percentage of women those teams contained. The bar indicates the range of scores in the group of teams at each level and the circle indicates the average. Source: Harvard Business Review, Carnegie Mellon Tepper School of Business.

The study also revealed groups whose conversation is dominated by a single person, or a small portion of the population, are collectively less intelligent than groups where communication is evenly shared. Researchers found groups with more women tended to have a more even communications distribution pattern.³

If this research is applied to the military, it suggests adding women can strengthen every organization. Our teams, from small unit infantry squads which as yet have no women, to the joint staff, which has less than 20 percent women, are potentially less intelligent than they could be if we were to optimize what women bring to the collective intelligence of groups. This intelligence need not come at the expense of physical strength, but rather can complement it.

2 Anita Woolley and Thomas Malone. “Defend Your Research: What Makes a Team Smarter? More Women,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2011, <http://hbr.org/2011/06/defend-your-research-what-makes-a-team-smarter-more-women/ar/1>

3 Ibid., slides 17-18.

Organizational Success and Diversity

A number of reports provide clear links between organizational success and the number of women in the most successful organization. For instance, the Catalyst Information Center publishes “Why Diversity Matters” which tracks studies that demonstrate the link between diversity and corporate success. Collectively, these studies reveal, “Companies with the most women board directors, especially those with three or more women board directors, had better financial performance than those with the least women board directors.”⁴ In 2009, Naissance Capital, an international investment company, made gender diversity a screening criterion for future investment initiatives because they understand the link between performance and having a critical mass of women in boardrooms.⁵ Furthermore, the 2009 “White House Project Report: Benchmarking Women’s Leadership” provides a snapshot of where women are today in terms of leadership in the United States. According to this report, when women are present in significant numbers, “the bottom line improves—from financial success to the quality and scope of decision making.”⁶ Unfortunately, the military, as a profession, does not compare favorably in terms of women’s participation in leadership positions.

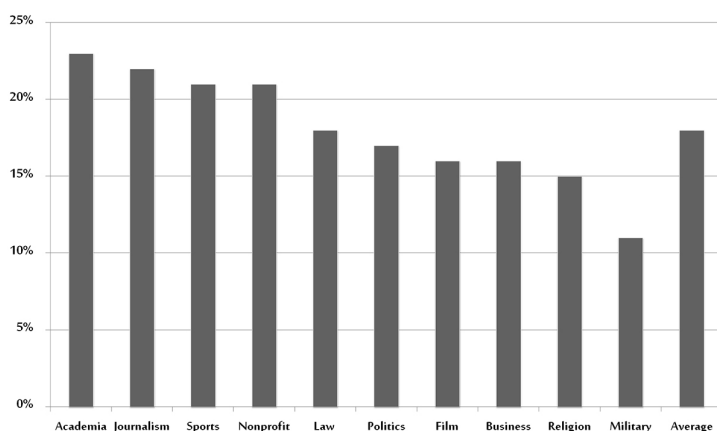


Figure 2. Percent of Women in Leadership Positions by Sector

The military bar in the chart above is based on women’s participation in the top five military ranks and includes O6s. In the Army, women comprise only 6.73 percent of general officers.⁷ Access to leadership positions in the military, especially at the general officer level, is directly linked to combat specialties. Eighty percent of our general officers are drawn from combat specialties from which women have been excluded. Lifting the combat exclusion policy now allows women increased opportunities to compete for “boardroom” positions and,

4 Catalyst Knowledge Center, “Why Diversity Matters,” July 27, 2012, 3, <http://catalyst.org/knowledge/why-diversity-matters>.

5 Naissance Capital, Women’s Leadership Fund, <http://www.naissancecapital.com/NC/?id=35>

6 The White House Project Report, “Benchmarking Women’s Leadership,” (New York: The White House Project), 3, http://www.in.gov/icw/files/benchmark_wom_leadership.pdf); 3.

7 Department of the Army, *General Officer Female Report Total Force* (unavailable to public).

as studies show, the results should be improved quality and scope of decisionmaking at the highest levels.

Unit Cohesion

During the 1992 Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, one TOPGUN instructor made the following statement to the commission, “We don’t believe that you can act as a unit unless you keep it the way it is, here it’s the bonding—it’s that intangible, the bonding, that makes a squadron good, better, and we don’t believe you can have that go on if we have females in aviation.”⁸ Today, 65 women fly combat jets in every aviation unit in the Navy with no degradation in unit performance. This evidence is further supported by studies that demonstrate unit cohesion and performance are not dependent on common traits like race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender.

In 2010, Rand conducted an extensive review of existing studies on unit cohesion. The review showed studies have generally focused on two distinct elements of unit cohesion: social cohesion and task cohesion. Social cohesion is the extent people like each other; task cohesion is the shared commitment group members have toward accomplishing a goal.⁹ This distinction between social and task cohesion is important and may clarify why the TOPGUN instructor believed women would negatively impact aviation units. He was likely basing his analysis on social cohesion not task cohesion.

All evidence indicates task cohesion is far more important to unit performance than social cohesion and some studies reveal high social cohesion is actually linked to negative group behaviors. High social cohesion is shown to lead to groupthink and polarized attitudes which often result in poor decisions by the group. The culture in the naval aviator community during the 1980s and early 1990s that led to events like the Tailhook scandal exemplifies excessive social cohesion that reinforced negative group behaviors. Furthermore, research shows extreme group cohesion is not an asset and group diversity can mitigate excessive commitment to social cohesion.¹⁰

Women already serve in close combat specialties in the following countries: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, and Sweden. Perhaps best known for its use of women in the military is the Israel Defense Force (IDF) where women comprise 34 percent of the force and are conscripted along with their male peers. Although the IDF restricts the service of women to 88 percent of available positions, women do serve in close combat positions in the Caracal Combat Regiment and in the Border Patrol. Women are excluded from some units

8 Missy Cummings, *Hornet’s Nest: The Experiences of One of the Navy’s First Female Fighter Pilots* (New York: Writer’s Digest, 2000), 249-250.

9 RAND Corporation, “Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy,” (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2010), http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR323.html.

10 Paul Cawkill, Alison Rogers, Sarah Knight, and Laura Spear, “Women in Ground Close Combat Roles: The Experiences of other Nations and a Review of the Academic Literature,” (Fareham, Hants UK: Defense Science and Technology Laboratory, 2009), 10. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27406/women_combat_experiences_literature.pdf

due to religious considerations necessitated by orthodox Jewish rules. In a 2005 study of female combatants, Israeli commanders reported women “exhibit superior skills” in (1) discipline and motivation, (2) maintaining alertness, (3) shooting, (4) managing tasks and organization, and (5) displaying knowledge and professionalism in weapons use.¹¹ Less well known is the Norwegian military which has employed women in all ground combat specialties, and in all units, since the early 1980s. The Norwegians report women increase operational effectiveness and there is no evidence that unit cohesion is affected.¹² Similarly, the Canadians, who have also been fully integrated since the 1980s, report there is no “negative effect on operational performance or team cohesion” due to the presence of women in combat units.¹³

Physical Requirements

A long-standing concern has been whether women possess the physical strength necessary to rescue male soldiers who are wounded, or whether they can perform other tasks requiring physical strength. However, the issue is not really that *all* women need to be as strong as *all* men. Rather, it is about letting those women serve who can meet the physical standards. In fact, many women can perform all the tasks required of infantry soldiers and many women have demonstrated physical prowess in the heat of battle. Just a few examples include the following:

- SPC Monica Brown, a combat medic, received the Silver Star in Afghanistan for bravery under fire when she rescued wounded male soldiers in the cavalry regiment to which she was assigned.
- MAJ Kellie McCoy, an engineer platoon leader, earned the Bronze Star with Valor when she ran through enemy fire not once but twice to rescue wounded soldiers in Iraq.
- SGT Julia Bringloe was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in Afghanistan for a particularly daunting 40-hour period in which she is credited with rescuing or recovering 11 wounded or killed soldiers.
- SSG Jessica Packard, US Air Force, scored the fastest course time of both sexes in the 2009 Firefighter Combat Challenge which included carrying a 175-pound victim while wearing full bunker gear.¹⁴

Conventional combat arms specialties have been closed to female soldiers; therefore, evidence of their ability to perform physically in combat units in the United States is nonexistent. However, predictive evidence can be gained by examining women’s performance in support units with combat missions. For example, women in military police units routinely perform some of the same functions as soldiers in combat units including route security, cordon and search missions, and conducting raids.

Examples of their successful performance abound although it has not been documented in formal studies. SGT Leigh Anne Hester won the Silver Star in Iraq for actions that included operating individual and

11 Ibid., 24.

12 Ibid., 28.

13 Ibid., 20.

14 Mathew McGovern, “Air Force Firefighters Demonstrate Skills at 2009 Scott Firefighter Combat Challenge,” *U.S. Air Force Military News*, November 20, 2009. <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123178858>

crew served weapons to locate, close with, and destroy an attacking enemy.¹⁵ 1LT Brittany Meeks led a quick-reaction force to the site of a supply convoy under attack: she directed her team to suppress the enemy by fire while calling in close air support; she secured vehicles and a downed Apache helicopter; she evacuated wounded soldiers and conducted a cordon and search that yielded enemy weapons.¹⁶ Women engineers graduate from the Army's Sapper Leader Course, a physically demanding 28-day course that includes infantry training missions. The course requires successful completion of combat patrolling, urban breaching, mountaineering, water operations, and reconnaissance, raid, and ambush techniques. Students must complete distance runs of 3-7 miles at a 7-minute pace and a 12-mile, 35-pound ruck march in under 3 hours. Before every meal, students must do 6 chin ups and climb a 12-foot horizontal ladder and a 30-foot rope. By the end, Sapper leaders—male and female—are “hardened combat engineers . . . prepared to fight on today's modern battlefield.”¹⁷

Despite these examples, which are further supported by more than 1,800 combat action badges awarded to women, some may argue that the gender-normed APFT is evidence that women are not physically able to perform in combat specialties. However, the combat arms branches have never established a single set of occupational physical standards required of all combat arms soldiers. Age-normed standards have long allowed for fluctuating physical performance for men based on age, not occupational requirements. It is time to reevaluate what the standards mean. Clearly, many women can meet the physical qualifications required of infantry soldiers.¹⁸

Conclusion

Women provide a vital contribution to critical and creative thinking and decisionmaking in our national security apparatus. This capability is unnecessarily missing in many military units where currently there are no women. If the US military wants to optimize its teams' collective intelligence and make better executive-level decisions, we must tap into the half of the population that is underutilized. As recent studies reveal, and as our foreign partners have demonstrated, our units and US national security overall will benefit by adding women to combat branches.

15 *Military Times*, Hall of Valor Award Citation: Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester, <http://projects.militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=3885>

16 Peter Kilner and Nate Self, *A Platoon Leader's Tour*, Google Books, http://books.google.com/books?id=Plv1AKHF5YC&pg=PA69&lpg=PA69&dq=lieutenant+brittany+meeks&source=bl&ots=lkL_vW_IMt&sig=ldz0Cy0CzdyzwsWSb2xZL2ZJjwwo&hl=en&sa=X&ei=haNuUaDjDYvK9QTgw4DwBA&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=lieutenant%20brittany%20meeks&f=false

17 U.S. Department of the Army, *Sapper Leader Course Pamphlet*, HHB 35th Engineer Battalion, 1st Engineer Brigade (Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri) (February 2010): 11. <http://armyrotc.mst.edu/media/academic/armyrotc/documents/sapperschoolinfo/SapperPamphlet.pdf>

18 A 42-year-old male infantryman is deemed fit to perform infantry duties if he can score 34 pushups and 38 sit-ups in 2 minutes and run 2 miles in 18 minutes and 42 seconds. Data from the West Point Class of 2011 reveals that over 96 percent of the female cadets met this standard.